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Obama, NATO should cut a deal with Khadafy

John Arquilla

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Tired of tyranny, racked by the effects of civil war, Libyans reached out beyond their borders for guidance - 2 1/2 millennia ago. Help came, not in the form of military intervention, but in wise advice from the Oracle at Delphi.

The prophetess there told the Libyans to reorganize along tribal lines, to keep the king in charge in his home area and to assign the rest of his powers as a "public right to the people." Herodotus, the "father of history," learned of this remarkable resolution on his visit to Libya a century after these events occurred. The tyrant, Battus the Lamé, lived up to the terms of the arbitration, and Libyans made steady social and economic progress for many years thereafter. When Battus died, his son Arcesilaus tried to restore the dictatorship, but he was killed in the attempt - just as the oracle had predicted.

Today, Libya suffers civil strife yet again. The people have rebelled against Moammar Khadafy's tyranny, but don't seem strong enough to throw off his rule. And so they have called out for help from afar, as their ancestors once did. But the response this time has lacked the subtle skill of the prophetess. Instead of negotiations, the oracles of our era have begun military operations designed for regime change - the latest wrinkle being the 24/7 presence of armed Predator drones in the skies over Libya. And a virtual Greek chorus of leaders - including President Obama - has said, "Khadafy must go."

The results of military intervention have been disappointing overall, after the limited success of opening air operations that kept Benghazi from falling and the rebels from being slaughtered. However, since then, U.S. and NATO forces have been dragged into a role of providing close air support to the largely incompetent insurgents. By doing so, the intervening forces have both escalated and prolonged the killing that they - and those who ordered them into battle - had intended to stop. Time and again in recent weeks, we have seen the battle sway back and forth, in large part because pro-Khadafy forces fight with the determination of men whose backs are to the wall.

There is no NATO to protect them if the war goes against the regime. Absent a ground invasion, Khadafy's loyalists will probably hold on. They have quickly learned to keep moving, as NATO attack aircraft often take several hours to strike targets called in by the rebels - or perhaps by their covert advisers. The loyalists have also left their heavy tanks behind and slipped into pickup trucks, making them look just like the insurgents. The ensuing confusion has led to some NATO air strikes killing the very fighters they are supporting. Regarding the limited effects of attack aircraft on dispersed ground units, the U.S. chief of naval operations, Adm. Gary Roughead, has put the matter succinctly: "The coordination that is required for attacking, particularly small (pro-Khadafy) units, is not there." It is a damning admission.

Clearly, it is high time for some oracular wisdom, and the solution offered up in ancient times - to cut a deal - is well worth exploring. Indeed, negotiations should be opened before the situation on the ground worsens, more are killed needlessly, and the world oil market is affected even more seriously than it already has been.

Representatives of the African Union have been in Libya this month, trying to mediate an agreement. Khadafy himself has tried diplomacy, even sending his emissary, Abdul Ati al-Obeidi, to Greece - to Athens, though, not Delphi - with little success. As for the

rebels, they have indicated that Khadafy's departure is their precondition for entering peace talks. They have not been pressured to soften their position. Indeed, the visit of Sen. John McCain, and his calls for a larger war, will make them less likely to conciliate. And President Obama has only clouded the matter by adding cryptically that "it is too early for negotiations."

But very soon it will be too late, as casualties mount, and NATO and American prestige are increasingly perceived as on the line. Right now, a replay of the oracle's ancient deal is the best option. Following it would limit Khadafy's rule and immediately empower most Libyans. The Delphic declaration also called for preventing succession by any of the ruler's sons, a condition that should be preserved as well.

The only thing that blocks this path to peace is our stiff-necked pride. To counter this ancient, self-destructive bent, rulings from the Oracle, whom all respected, were often sought. The prophetess offered graceful solutions that entailed no loss of face for either side. And while she is no longer there at Delphi, her ageless wisdom remains. In the Libyan case, it is worth following to the letter.

John Arquilla teaches in the special operations program at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey. His forthcoming book is "Insurgents, Raiders, and Bandits." To comment, go to www.sfgate.com/chronicle/submissions/#1.

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